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THE COMEDY GAZELLE



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger.

Thank you for your support!

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: CURTIS SHAW FLAGG

Curtis Shaw Flagg (@curtisshawflagg) is the President of Operations at Laugh Factory Chicago as well as a Talent Manager at Artists First. One of my first ever interviews back in 2020, we reconnected to discuss building credibility, working your way into Laugh Factory, the role of a manager, representation in Chicago, advice for frustrated comics, and more!

From a booking perspective, how important is it to you to see comics developing new material?

You get points from me for doing new material. But also, I understand when a comic is doing the same shit for six, seven years. Comedy is so much different than music because if you see a comic twice and they're doing the same material, most audience members are like, "Oh, you're doing the same stuff." But if you went and saw a band and they didn't play their greatest hits, you'd probably be bummed. But I think comics that challenge themselves to work in some new material creatively ascend a little faster. Whether or not they find mainstream success is always a crapshoot, but the ones who are willing to test the limits I find feel better about it.

Every booker has their own sense of humor and preferences. How do you balance booking people that maybe aren't your favorites, but are still funny to someone?

Well, for one, it depends on what you're booking and where you're booking it. If I booked a bar show, or a pop up show, or something non-club related, I might book it a little different. But I book a showcase club in a major metropolitan city that has, I'd say, 300 bookable comics. There's a business in booking. You have paid customers who have spent a couple hundred dollars, in some instances, before they even step in the door. Who you present to them makes a difference. I can also put together what I feel is a Curtis funny lineup, and then I can also put together a lineup that should hopefully mirror my customer base, right? It's a melting pot of people, so I obviously want to book the show as diverse as possible. We also have our regulars, the people who have built up credibility, where I don't have to worry about how it's going to go.



How do people build that credibility?

You kind of show your work. Maybe you're doing it elsewhere and I see it, or am told of it, or you send it to me. But unfortunately, it does come down to how you do when you're given the opportunity. And it sucks, cause if somebody has waited and waited and then it doesn't go well for whatever reason, you still got an F on the test, regardless of if your tummy hurts or not that day. There's a human element, but there's also a long list of people who are deserving of the next opportunity, so you go to the end of the queue, so to speak. It's like the Tom Brady thing. If somebody goes down and your number's called, what do you do in that moment? You should never take a show for granted, even if the crowd is funky and weird. I get that all the time — comics saying that the crowd is one particular way. Who gives a fuck? It's your moment; it's your time to do what you do. So, how do you respond in that moment?

How much of your booking is based on staff or outside recommendations? How big is word of mouth?

Oh, a big part of it. I'd say word of mouth is over 50%. If it was just me and I didn't care what anybody else said, the lineups would look a lot different. I do lean on having outside produced shows. I can't be everywhere, so it's nice to have people who care say, "Hey, you should

check this person out,” or “Have you heard of this person? They did great on the mic, or on Fresh Faces, or Vouch, or Humboldt Jungle, or CYSK.” For what it's worth, the competition is stiff and you can get pissed because you see someone on the lineups more than you feel they deserve. And you're like, “Well, what do I have to do to get in?” Well, clearly not what you're already doing. Think about that. Maybe it's not the booker. Maybe it's not that they are just missing you. Maybe you're missable, for the moment.

How often does a regular get usurped?

Happens all the time, more than I think the up and coming people realize. And a lot of it is you'll get booked a bunch because you're available, but then you go and do the road, so now those spots have freed up and I'm booking other people. And so, those people will be like, “Yo, did I do something?” And it's like, “No, I booked you a bunch. You kind of got it, but then you went off and did other stuff.” And let's say you didn't go on the road — you did two or three weekends out of the month, and then there's a couple months where you aren't booked. Well, that's because you gotta give other people opportunities. You can't give the same people the same opportunities without giving other people an opportunity. But how do you give people an opportunity? Well, unfortunately, by not giving someone else one. There's only so many spots; I can't create a day of the week.

Do you have a mental roadmap you can take people through on how they can get booked at Laugh Factory? What does that process look like?

I'd say there are a few different roadmaps. You have the traditional route where you do the mic, we like you, and you get put on Fresh Faces and you do well there, probably a few times. You do well there, you get an early spot during the week or on a Sunday. You do well there, you get a preferred spot on the weekend. You do well there, you get booked more there and then you get extra spots throughout the month on various shows. Then you have the outside produced show route, where you do someone else's show that they book at the club. Most producers are proud of the people who do well on their shows, so they'll pass your name along. Then I see you and put you in the first pipeline. The third is you're good and I just didn't know you existed. For whatever reason, I just didn't see you, and I catch you out somewhere, and you're just in. I'm gonna call it the Josh Johnson effect. I saw Josh Johnson once on an open mic and I was like, “Never do the mic again, unless you want to.” You would be

stupid to make someone who is clearly ready for the moment go through the mud. I always say, I hate when people fuck around on the mic and I also hate when people fuck around on a show that they don't think is worthy. Because you truly never know. I usually will pop in on consensus not great shows, because if you show up in the moment for the show that may not pay the most, have the most people, or have the most recognition, and you rip that room, I already know what you're gonna do. It's kind of a true test of character. And sometimes it doesn't go great, but that doesn't mean it all ends for you. That just means you gotta figure it out and come back stronger.

I know you're managing comics now as well. As a manager and booker, how important is professionalism to you versus somebody's raw comedic talent?

“Is the juice worth the squeeze?” It's the oldest adage and it always remains true. If you are what people would deem as difficult or combative, it's like, “Hey, are you making enough money for me to put up with this shit?” And let's say you are making enough money, then it becomes, “What's my level of happiness? What's my level of passion for working for you?” Because there's people who might be extremely creative who have great things in their mind that you're helping them get out, and you're building something together, and they just might have a weird personality. But how much of that can you truly withstand before you are feeling devalued or not appreciated or taken for granted? A lot of it is feeling-based. I've worked with comics long enough that I feel like my level of my pain tolerance for that is pretty high. So when you get into an intimate business relationship with someone, you carry that baggage into it too. But also, it's not all baggage. There's a shit ton of positives to those seemingly negatives, and most of it shows itself through the art.

In simple terms, can you explain what a manager does?

A manager's role is to help be an architect of someone's career. If you have a brand and a business that you want to build as a creator, as an artist, then that's where management can help you. So, it spans a little bit outside of standup, but standup is a piece of the arsenal. Who are you as a standup can ultimately dictate who you are as an actor, who you are as a writer, whether it be running a room, being a part of the staff, what you're adding to the team, et cetera. And so, as a manager, we're saying, "Alright, here's an opportunity. What do we want out of this opportunity? Does this help catapult you to the next opportunity? Is this a good resume builder? Because, you can't really get that opportunity unless you're doing this."

When you first sit down with a new client, do they generally know what they want to do and you're just there to help them? How much guidance is involved?

It's equal parts. I feel like if you don't have a vision for the person that you're sitting down with, you probably shouldn't rep them in the first place. But you could also have a vision for someone that they don't even see in themselves yet because they've been focused on something else, and then you can encourage them to work towards it. There are people who maybe didn't start as great writers, but were great stand ups and just didn't know the technical pieces of how to write, how to do a spec script, or how to make a joke work on paper. You can onboard them in different ways to learn that, like connecting them with a writer that already is doing it. They already have the comedy brain; they just gotta figure out how to put it on paper. The same goes for on-screen too, like acting. Not everyone may be a Julliard-trained actor, but you can take the time as a standup to take those courses. It truly only helps for a standup to do improv, for an improv to do standup, for a standup to take acting classes, or get an acting coach, and do these different things. You're just working out muscles that either have never been worked, or have just been dormant for so long. So, in that way, you can inject what your vision is.

How often are you working with somebody that's a little greener in their vision for themselves?

For me, a lot. I'm a new manager, but I've wanted to do this for a very long time. I've obviously made relationships and I have the people that I've known and been aware of for a very long time. They're here and they're still trying to get it together, and my goal, my



purpose, is to help them get to that level with the resources that I'm privy to. But also, reps are heat-seeking missiles. If you're getting hot, we're gonna know about it. That's why I tell people, "Yo, go out and get hot." If you have a phone and a data plan, you can get hot. It's hard and not hard.

Something that I've heard is that if you're looking for a manager, you need to be able to give them something to manage. Can you speak to that at all?

Have something else to offer. Great, you're funny. That's the entry point for me. Why am I signing someone who's not funny? If you look at it like a resume, and the prerequisite is a college degree, if you're funny, great, you got a bachelor's. From there, now I'm comparing Applicant A to Applicant B, C, D, E. Applicant A, he's got his bachelor's; he's funny. That's it. He can go up and do a killer set on stage. Applicant B, he's funny, can do a killer set on stage, has a writing packet, has projects they want to develop, and has acted before. Then applicant C can do everything applicant A and B can do, but they also direct. Also, do you have any marketing bones in your body? Do you know how to sell yourself as much as you can sell your comedy? Because at some point, you will have to sell yourself. The people who are the most introverted, the most anti-marketing, anti-sales, they all

are doing it. You can't escape it. You can, but then you just know where your ceiling is. So, you gotta at least show you want it. Maybe you don't have it quite yet, but you gotta at least show you want it.

Can you walk me through a specific example? I know you rep Reg Thomas. What made him stand out to you?

Reg and I talked about this last week. He came to Chicago, he did a show at the club and I liked him; he's good, he's a funny dude. Starts there, right? So he gets put in the pile of bachelor's degrees. Then he opened for Amanda Seales at the Improv and I went out to that show. At that point, I was contemplating making the move into management. So when I was talking to him, I was like, "Yeah, I'm actually thinking about being manager," and he was like, "Hey, I'm out here in these streets."

And you had just met him?

This was years prior that he did the Laugh Factory originally and I met him. So this is maybe two, three years between. A couple years go by, I see him at the Improv, and we had that conversation. You have a lot of people on your radar, and you're watching them. What do you do when you don't have a boost? Are you working hard? Are you out trying to make it? Or are you just poo pooing? So, I saw him at the Improv and shortly thereafter his Don't Tell set came out. And when I saw that, I was like, "Oh, he can do this, this, and this." He's a great standup, he's a really great writer, and I really liked his stage presence and his voice. There's a really great manager out of New York, and when I pitched a client to him he said something that really stuck with me, and it's been kind of my litmus test: "What do you think is that person's magnum opus?" What is the peak success for the person like? What is their top of the tops that you see for them? And sometimes you can't articulate it, but you see it. Then you are just like, "That's what we're going to get together." It may not be Kevin Hart selling out Lincoln Financial, running his own company, and producing and directing, but maybe it's a fire, classic HBO special that's timeless — and you make a good amount of money on the road. Maybe you are going to figure out that your best lane is producing and directing and not performing, and you're going to write *Get Out*. That's what I see, and then we have a conversation and you might agree or you might go, "Actually, I really want this," and I go, "Oh shit, that's dope. Let's go for it."

How has your perspective on the industry changed since you've become a manager?

It completely changed everything I thought about the industry. I was wrong about how opportunities are given and the work that gets put into it. A lot of times I was just like, "Man, this guy got that because of nepotism or whatever," which can be a thing, but you realize that that's such a small percentage of what is out there. The amount of talent, the amount of opportunities and the amount of representation that is fighting for that talent is more than you could even kind of think of. I learned in an interesting way because I started three months before the whole industry shut down, so you got to see what it truly looks like when there are no opportunities. When you see the infrastructure from the outside looking in, and then you're inside looking in, it's crazy. And how things are put together from concept to manifestation is equally as vast. A little piece of IP gets developed into this multi-million dollar project, and there are so many of them. Everybody's got an idea, everybody's got a show concept, a movie concept, a live concept, and you gotta know and be aware of who can do what. So it is who you know, because that person is the one that can make the decision. So, most of it is learning who's who in the business: who's a producer, who's a director, who can greenlight, who's a buyer. It's a whole different world. You want to have good relationships with people who trust your roster, your company, your brain as a manager, and the people that you're bringing to them. Which goes back to comics squandering those opportunities. All those little things build up equity for you as an artist. If you're known for not doing, then you won't get to do, because it makes it hard for your advocates to push you through. And when you say shit online, keep it to yourself. Nobody gives a fuck.

You said there's a lot of representation out there, but I think sometimes it doesn't feel like that because we're in Chicago.

They're here. Oh, they're here. There is a lot of industry and it all doesn't have to be managers and agents. There are a ton of corporate buyers, there are a ton of show producers and bookers, casting people, directors. I think people just need to expand their thought of what industry is. Everyone's just looking for an agent, like, "Oh, I need somebody to sign me so I can go on the road and get this money." But there are studios here; there are billions of dollars being poured into arts and entertainment and they want to find qualified people to do it. So when you show up and do your thing, put your best self forward because that is going to be the snapshot of who you are to those people. If they saw you and you ate shit or you weren't on your game that day, and they're thinking of someone for an opportunity and then your name comes up, they'll go, "Eh, I saw him, he did a thing, and it's not quite right. They're not ready yet." We get that a lot: "Not ready yet." But there are people who are out and about scouting. They go to the places and meet you where you are. Like, what better place? What better place to find the person than in their element, doing what it is that they do. All you gotta do is show up and show out.

I know you're really close with [former owner of Jokes & Notes] Mary [Lindsey]. What are some things you learned from her that have stuck with you?

Add the gratuity; put that 20 percent on the bill. Like, you run a business, baby. At the end of the day, you run a business. It is a business, so you treat it as such. We have a bar, but we're not a bar; we are a premier comedy club. There's an expectation, not only to the staff, but to the customer and to the comedian. So how you are presented and present yourself goes a long way. So all those instances of being drunk, that is the reflection upon the club.

That does sound like Mary, like, "I'm not standing for this."

Mary's also a very strong-willed, experienced black woman who is like a second mother to me. How she is able to talk to people and do it — I can't do that; I gotta do it the Curtis way. But I also know the amount of respect that she gets and demands of people. And so, that's the world I can like live in, right? By the actions you make, you receive, or hope to receive, a level of respect. And if I don't get it, then I just don't work with them. There's a lot of people who are very curious, like, "Damn, why don't I get to work here?" Well, because you don't respect the club. And by proxy, you don't respect me. If you're an adult,

I can't take the time to explain that to you. I have too much to do. I have too many other fires to put out than to explain to you how respect works. But I also try to do the same thing. That's the biggest piece that I learned from Mary: I'm going to lead with respect until you give me a reason not to, and I'm going to assume as much from you until you give me a reason not to.

Do you have advice for anybody in Chicago that's frustrated with where they're at career wise?

Keep being frustrated. You just gotta manifest the frustration in a positive way. It's the same way that athletes motivate themselves to compete. They're just trying to be better than their past self; they're trying to be better than the last game. No matter what the industry is, everyone's just trying to get a win. And until you get them, you're frustrated. So, stay frustrated because that gets you through. I know comics that are the opposite; they're too content. And at some point, it hits them and they kind of tap out. They're like, "Yeah, it's too late." I was talking to somebody and they, like a lot of comics, suffer from depression, and they've started to realize that their depression is bred from their frustrations of not reaching their goals. I was like, "I think you group too many goals into one goal." You should identify a singular objective and set it as a goal, then have milestones along the way. Then, if you achieve one, it motivates you and serves as a jumping-off point to the next. Then all of these goals aren't lumped into one, where you get sad because it doesn't feel like anything along the way. So keep stretching out your goals and stay frustrated.



VOUCH

THE COMEDY GAZELLE PRESENTS



Hosted by
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SAM ROSSI, HANNAH BELMONT, SYED HASNAIN**

Laugh Factory | 8:00pm | 2/26/25

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

LAZ PATILLO

Laz is an up-and-coming artist and comedian with incredible drive. Along with his comedy troupe, Deep End, he has created a platform for young Black comedians to come together, blending sketch comedy and hip-hop. I was asked to DJ an event for Deep End, and from the moment I met Laz, I knew he was going to be successful. He's not only funny, but also has a great head on his shoulders. There aren't many people doing Black improv, but Laz stands out, and he knows how to build a team that's focused on the Black experience.

MIKE DWYER

Keeps getting better every time I see him. In the last year he went from a pretty funny guy to an absolute killer. I don't even care that his eyes are closed and neither should you.

JOEY BEDNARSKI

He's a killer, and he's doing it with the most cartooniest, silliest bits. Absolute delight to watch.

TINA YOUKHANA

Her dark comedy may not be for everyone, but she brings it to every show and lineup she's on. She never gives up or half asses a set. She works hard and deserves so much credit.

CAROLYN DICKEY

What I love about Carolyn is that she is a genuinely nice comic who connects with everyone in the community. Also she runs a fun showpen mic called, "MyBuddys Live" every Thursday at 10PM.

RON BLOOM

There are a lot of moving pieces that allow a comedy scene to function. However, a commonly overlooked aspect which allows this forest of creatures to thrive is the sunshine. That sunshine is Ron Bloom. Although unmistakably pale, what he lacks in melanin he makes up for in helping everyone grow. He's always there if you need him; he's always there if you need a ride, a producer or simply advice on life. He cares for the people as much as he does his craft and it shows in how his impressions always last. Cheers to Ron! May you continue to Bloom!

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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